

Essential Skills Qualifications in Schools Project: Interim Report

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The project was initiated in response to the increased weighting placed upon the cross-curricular skills of Communication and Using Mathematics in the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum and, in particular, the requirement for schools to report on pupils' progression in these skills.
- 1.2 The project aims to provide advice and recommendations to Government on the feasibility of having Essential Skills qualifications available in schools by establishing:
 - how Essential Skills relate to statutory provision and assessment requirements at Key Stages 3 and 4; and
 - how appropriate Essential Skills qualifications would be for pupils at Key Stages 3 and/or 4 in schools.
- 1.3 This interim report sets out the progress made to date in relation to the scope of the project set out in the project plan. It also highlights some issues which have arisen.

2 Participating centres

- 2.1 Sixteen schools, including four grammar schools, and one training organisation agreed to participate in the project. The grammar schools are delivering the Essential Skills to Year 10 pupils whilst the others have focused their delivery on pupils in Years 11, 12 and 13. Most of these pupils are involved because they are either potential borderline C/Ds in GCSE English or maths, or pupils who are doing the Essential Skills qualification(s) instead of GCSEs. The ability to gain an Essential Skills qualification at Level 1 or 2 is seen as particularly important for those pupils who wish to progress to FE colleges and who would not be able to cope with the full breadth of a GCSE. Schools are also now aware that the University of Ulster will accept the Level 2 Essential Skills qualification as an alternative to GCSE.
- 2.2 The following models of delivery have been identified and will be commented upon in the final report:
 - delivered by English and maths graduates within the normal timetabled time for English and maths;
 - delivered by English and maths graduates within the normal school day with specific time allocated to Essential Skills teaching;
 - delivered by adult essential skills tutors within the normal school day;
 - delivered by adult essential skills tutors after school hours;
 - out of school provision delivered by adult essential skills tutors.

- 2.3 At this stage it is anticipated that 1,132 pupils will enter for an Essential Skills qualification by June. The final report will identify attainment of the skills. The entries are as follows:

Literacy:	9 for Entry 1;	5 for Entry 2;	43 for Entry 3
Numeracy:	1 for Entry 1;	8 for Entry 2;	41 for Entry 3
Communication:	238 for Level 1;	296 for Level 2	
AoN	212 for Level 1:	279 for Level 2	

3 Standards across Essential/Cross-curricular Skills and their relationship with GCSE grades

- 3.1 Members of the CCEA Curriculum Division team considered the Key/Essential/Functional skills standards when developing the seven levels of progression for the Cross-curricular skills. It is anticipated that pupils achieving the higher levels of progression would be capable of achieving an Essential Skills qualification.
- 3.2 There was some comment about the comparability of demand across the Desktop tasks. Although the nature of the questions is similar across the tasks for Communication, it was considered that density, presentation and vocabulary in some of the reading resources were more demanding than that required for GCSE English. One of the Communication teachers identified the task she would use because she considered it 'easier'. There is a need to ensure that what is meant by 'easier' is actually 'more accessible' in terms of the reading resources provided.

4 Appropriateness of assessment contexts and methodology

- 4.1 The assessment methodology is considered appropriate for those pupils who would not be doing GCSE English and maths. The Key Stage 3 English teachers see their Essential Skills work as good preparation for GCSE English. There is less consensus around the AoN, because GCSE maths no longer requires coursework.
- 4.2 Teachers are interested to know if the Essential Skills qualification could replace the End of Key Stage tests. One English teacher in a grammar school said he would be very disappointed if he would not be able to continue next year. He has changed his schemes of work etc to accommodate the pilot and has had a very positive and motivated response from his Year 10 pupils (boys). He considered the Action-based Activity work to be very supportive of the skills and capabilities requirements in the revised curriculum.
- 4.3 There is a realisation that because these qualifications were developed for adults not all of the assessment contexts would be suitable for pupils in schools. There would, therefore, be a requirement to develop more appropriate assessment contexts.

- 4.4 A number of secondary schools have now heard about the project and are asking if they may join. Their requests are based on the fact that they consider GCSE English and, in particular, maths to be unsuitable qualifications for some of their pupils.

5 Opportunities to achieve an Essential Skills qualification through GCSE

- 5.1 Communication covers the same speaking/listening/reading/writing skills as are assessed in GCSE English: speaking and listening through the Action-based Activities/English coursework and reading/writing through the Desktop Task/English Paper 2. At present, about 62% of candidates achieve grades A-C in the English paper 2 as opposed to 70% achieving grades A-C in the whole exam. These figures highlight the compensatory nature of the GCSE. As yet we have no comparable statistics for AoN/GCSE maths.
- 5.2 Some of the pilot schools have agreed to give a Level 2 Desktop Task to their pupils who will be doing GCSE English and maths this year. Comparisons can then be made between GCSE outcomes and those of the Desktop Tasks. All pupils will undertake the same task so that there is consistency. Tasks will be marked by CCEA and the results given to the teachers. Teachers are aware that achievement of a Level 2 task will not constitute an Essential Skills qualification.
- 5.3 It is anticipated that approximately 200 GCSE English candidates and 200 GCSE maths candidates will complete the task. The outcomes of this exercise will be detailed in the final report.
- 5.4 The issue of equivalence between Level 2 Essential Skills and GCSE A*-C was raised by most teachers.

6 Training

- 6.1 Teachers have undertaken the work without training in delivering the Essential Skills core curriculum. They consider the knowledge and understanding set out in the core curriculum to be an integral part of learning in their subject. At this stage most of the Action-based Activity is completed as project work within English or maths although Geography, GCSE Motor Vehicle and Road Users Studies and Careers are also contributing in some schools.
- 6.2 Teachers and tutors were asked to provide some evidence of their approach to delivering the skills. This was available for perusal at the Project management Board meeting.

7 Resourcing implications for schools

- 7.1 The delivery of Essential Skills to a class of over twenty pupils creates significant challenges for teachers, in particular, the need for one-to-one interaction. Where

adult tutors are being used they are dealing with small numbers of pupils and can provide individual attention. However, it has been pointed out the adult tutors in the colleges are having to deal with increased numbers and are beginning to experience similar challenges.

7.2 Other points raised include:

- All spoke highly of the support provided in the Learner's and Tutor's guides and the training provided by CCEA awarding body staff and Principal Moderators.
- Essential Skills provide a pathway to progression and a sense of achievement for pupils who would not otherwise gain a qualification.
- There is significant concern that those pupils who are succeeding with Essential Skills will no longer have the opportunity to take them after this year. Some schools are planning for progression through the skills.
- Teachers want more sample Desktop Tasks.
- Some would like a text book and guidance materials in keeping with other curriculum materials.

8 Issues arising

- 8.1 Members of the project team have been getting queries from schools which are not in the project and which want to offer Essential Skills to their pupils. At the same time, schools which are in the project wish to continue to offer Essential Skills qualifications to their pupils. The opportunity for pupils to achieve the qualification is considered to be of particular significance, especially at Key Stage 4.

9 Developments in England and Wales

- 8.1 At present, England will require Functional Skills achievement to act as a hurdle for attaining Grades A*-C in GCSE English and maths. Wales is retaining Key Skills and is piloting a GCSE English which embeds the functionality.